Teacher Retention in Public Schools:
A Review of the Research

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UPBEAT

Teacher Turnover in Public Schools:
A National Problem

Teachers are a school's most valuable resource. Studies consistently find that, of all school-related factors, teachers have the largest impact on students' academic and social-emotional development (Blazar & Kraft, 2017; Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004; Rockoff, 2004). Developing and retaining an effective teaching staff is perhaps the most important avenue through which administrators can support school improvement efforts (Simon & Johnson, 2015). Yet, the "revolving door" of teaching—a phenomenon defined by "large numbers of quality teachers depart[ing] their jobs for reasons other than retirement" (Ingersoll, 2001, p. 501) persists across American public schools.

Teacher turnover is a significant problem in U.S. public schools. Ingersoll and colleagues (2003) report that between 40 and 50 percent of new teachers leave teaching within the first five years. Minority teachers depart from schools at far higher rates than their White counterparts—a rate that has increased substantially in the last four decades (Ingersoll, May, & Collins, 2017, 2019). Large urban school districts often experience even higher rates of turnover (Ingersoll, 2001; Papay et al., 2020) and many urban schools lose over half of their teaching staff every five years (Allensworth, Ponisciak, & Mazzeo, 2009; Hemphill & Nauer, 2009; Marinell & Coca, 2013). Furthermore, teachers disproportionally leave large urban school districts for suburban, high-achieving, high-income schools (Lankford, Loeb, and Wyckoff, 2002; Ingersoll & May, 2012). Consequently, children attending high-poverty schools are more likely than their peers in wealthier schools to experience inconsistent staffing from one year to the next and to be taught by teachers who are new to their school and, frequently, new to the profession (Hanushek et al., 2004; Hemphill & Nauer, 2009; Johnson et al., 2005).

Schools pay a high price when they lose teachers. In addition to generating substantial financial costs (Barnes, Crowe, & Schaefer, 2007; Birkeland & Curtis, 2006; Milanowski & Odden, 2007), turnover also creates organizational instability. This contributes to a cycle of poor working conditions, which profoundly influences teachers' career decisions (for a review, see Simon & Johnson, 2015) and makes it difficult for principals to hire teachers who are a strong match for their school (Neild, Useem, Travers, & Lesnick, 2003; Liu, Rosenstein, Swan & Khalil, 2008). Consequently, turnover negatively affects student achievement, particularly among students who live in low-income communities (Ronfeldt, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2013).

Reducing turnover among effective teachers is of central importance for improving the quality of education in U.S. public schools. Below, we review the research behind the 22 factors assessed in the Teach Upbeat Survey. Evidence suggests that these factors—all components of a teacher's working conditions—predict and explain teacher turnover. For the purposes of this review, we organize them into five broad categories: School Leadership Opportunities; Teacher Development Practices and Resources; Teacher Hiring and Career Development; Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and Cultural Competence; and Personal & Organizational Purpose.

School Leadership Opportunities

Teachers are best supported when they work in environments characterized by trust, respect, and commitment to student learning. They desire to be treated with respect for their professional expertise and experience. When administrators engage teachers as collaborators by developing teacher leadership positions or granting them instructional autonomy, teachers are more likely to describe their work environments positively (Johnson et al., 2014). Likewise, when teachers have opportunities to collaborate with peers and parents, they are more successful in their work with students (Allensworth et al., 2009; Kraft et al., 2015) and ultimately, they are more likely to stay in their positions (Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012; Simon & Johnson, 2015).

Autonomy: Teachers expect to use their professional expertise to inform their curriculum design and pedagogical practice (Johnson, 2019). They are more likely to stay in schools where they believe that their colleagues have a "can do" attitude and collaborate on school improvement (Allensworth et al., 2009; Johnson et al., 2012; Johnson, 2019). In addition, through interviews with teachers, Johnson and colleagues (2004) found that turnover rates are higher when teachers do not have autonomy over instructional choices.

Principal/Teacher Trust: Teachers are more likely to succeed in a school culture characterized by high expectations, trust, and mutual respect among administrators and teachers (Kraft & Papay, 2014). Relational trust between principals and teachers creates a stable and supportive professional environment (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Bryk et al., 2010).

Instructional Leadership: Teachers are more likely to stay in schools where their principals recognize the many things that they, as school leaders, can do to influence instruction and invest in it (Bryk et al., 2010). Teachers cite support from administrators as the most important influence on their career decisions (Boyd et al., 2011; Ingersoll, 2001). Those who do not view their principals as instructional leaders are more likely to leave (Ingersoll, 2001; Ladd, 2011; Luekens et al., 2004). The effectiveness of school principals is a particularly important predictor of turnover in schools with large numbers of disadvantaged students (Grissom, 2011).

Collaboration: Teachers want to work in schools where educators support one another by "teach[ing] each other the practice of teaching" (Little, 1982, p. 331) and they are more likely to stay in schools that support them in doing so (Simon & Johnson, 2015). Smith and Ingersoll (2004) found that first-year teachers who were given time to collaborate with colleagues were less likely to leave after their first year of teaching. Similarly, Johnson, Reinhorn and Simon (2018) found that successful high-poverty schools relied on formal instructional teams as a central mechanism for school improvement. Teachers reported that their teams supported their instruction and contributed to their school's success by creating coherence across classrooms and shared responsibility for students. Kardos and colleagues (2001) found that in such schools—those with an "integrated professional culture" (p. 250)—teachers' work responsibilities were "deliberately arranged to intersect" (p. 277) through exchanges that drew on both the new ideas of novices and the wisdom of veterans. Consequently, teachers with various lengths of tenure viewed themselves as belonging to a collective with joint responsibility for each other, their students, and their community. Ultimately, this led to greater satisfaction with the schools.

Parent/Teacher Communication: Regular and effective teacher-parent communication builds trust and encourages teachers to stay in their schools (Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005; Johnson, 2019). Communication between teachers and parents also increases relational trust (Bryk et al., 2010). Teachers are more likely to stay in schools where parents are involved in their children's education, supportive of teachers (Allensworth et al., 2009), and engaged in "joint problem solving" about student behavior (Bryk et al., 2010, p. 58). This type of parent-teacher interaction is far more predictive of teacher retention than are other forms of parent engagement, such as helping with their child's schoolwork (Allensworth et al., 2009).

School Safety and Order: Teachers leave schools where a lack of student discipline impedes their ability to teach (Allensworth et al., 2009; Johnson et al., 2005; Ladd, 2011; Marinell & Coca, 2013). Viano and colleagues (2020) demonstrate that enforcement of discipline—a "malleable factor" (p. 1) within the principal's locus of control—is one of the most critical factors in teachers' decisions about where to teach. Not surprisingly, schools with high rates of student misbehavior, crime, violence, and bullying have high rates of teacher turnover (Allensworth et al., 2009; Kraft, Marinell, &Yee, 2016). It is especially important to teachers that they have administrative and parental support to address student behavior (Bryk et al., 2010) and that they agree with their school's approach to student conduct.

Appreciation: Teaching is a demanding profession, and as organizational psychology and management research suggests, recognizing employee contributions can improve employee retention (Brun & Dugas, 2008). Among teachers, Gonzalez (1995) found that appreciation from administrators, students, and parents improved job satisfaction and increased a teacher's likelihood of remaining in their classroom. Yet, teachers often feel underappreciated and rarely report being publicly recognized by their principal for their work (TNTP, 2012). Farkas, Johnson, & Foleno (2000) found few teachers felt respected and appreciated, while many felt that they were "scapegoats for all the problems facing education" (p. 16).

Teacher Development Practices and Resources

Teachers are more likely to stay in schools that support their ongoing development, provide regular feedback on instruction, and offer fair evaluation of their practice (Johnson, 2004; Johnson, 2019; Loeb et al., 2005). In addition, teachers require physical resources to perform their job well. Working conditions that support teachers are also supportive learning conditions for students (Bryk et al., 2010; Johnson et al., 2012).

Professional Development: Teachers need to be prepared to teach well. Novice teachers, in particular, are in need of targeted professional development (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). Effective professional development should be delivered in a manner that aligns with a school's instructional goals, includes active learning experiences, allows for collaboration, is focused on subject-matter-specific content, and provides expert coaching and feedback—all over a sustained duration that affords teachers opportunities for incremental change to their instruction (Darling-Hammond, Hyler, & Gardner, 2017; Desimone & Garet, 2015; Hill, 2007) The quality of a school's professional development is among the strongest determinants of teachers' satisfaction with their working conditions and subsequent retention (Loeb et al., 2005).

Work/Life Balance: Teachers are more satisfied with their jobs when they have a reasonable teaching load (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Johnson, 2004; Luekens et al., 2004). Too often, teachers leave high-poverty and under-performing schools when they are assigned large classes, classes that are outside their expertise, or classes that span multiple subjects or grade levels (Simon & Johnson, 2015). It is common for novice teachers in such schools to cope with several aspects of misassignment simultaneously, which also bears heavily on their ability to teach effectively (Donaldson & Johnson, 2010; Ingersoll, 2002; Johnson, Berg, & Donaldson, 2005). Johnson (2019) also found that teachers in schools with unusually long hours also report struggling to maintain balance between work and home-life and frequently plan to depart.

Resources and Facilities: Teachers' ability to teach is shaped by school building conditions and the educational resources available (Simon, Evans & Maxwell, 2007). As such, the quality of the physical environment in which teachers work has a substantial effect on their retention (Buckley, Schneider, & Shang, 2005). Loeb et al. (2005) found that one of the strongest predictors of teacher turnover is a lack of appropriate facilities, technology, textbooks and instructional materials. Johnson et al. (2012) found a similar relationship between teachers' perceptions of school resources and the likelihood that they stay at their schools.

Evaluation: When teachers perceive their evaluation process as fair and supportive, they are more likely to stay, to be more effective with students, and to improve at greater rates over time (Dee & Wyckoff, 2015; Kraft & Papay, 2014; Taylor & Tyler, 2012). In schools that retain teachers, principals think about their teachers as learners and commit to helping them improve continually (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Cochran-Smith et al., 2012; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003). Teachers want to work for principals who regularly conduct fair evaluations of their teaching practice and, in the process, provide useful suggestions for improving pedagogy (Reinhorn & Johnson, 2014; Reinhorn et al., 2017; Johnson, 2019).

Teacher Hiring and Career Development

Teachers remain in schools where administrators invest in human capital by hiring skilled teachers and support staff who are committed to their school's mission (Liu & Johnson, 2006; Simon, Johnson, & Reinhorn, 2019), encourage teacher leadership and input in decision-making (Allensworth et al., 2009), invest in teachers' advancement (Ingersoll, 2001), and care about teachers' well-being (Farkas et al., 2000).

Teacher Voice and Leadership: Being involved in making decisions about school governance is important to teachers (Boyd et al., 2011; Ingersoll, 2001; Johnson et al., 2012). Teachers value open communication with their administrators (Kraft et al., 2016; Johnson, 2019) and often assume additional responsibilities as a part of a school's structure of distributed leadership (Spillane, 2012; Supovitz, D'Auria, & Spillane, 2019). Staffing stability is higher in schools where teachers report having strong relationships with their school principal and having influence over decision making (Allensworth et al., 2009), including being engaged in hiring fellow colleagues (Simon et al., 2019).

Recruitment, Hiring, and Onboarding: Effective teacher hiring is fundamental to school improvement (Simon et al., 2019). Teachers who are hired through an "information-rich process"—one that promotes exchanges about whether a candidate's skills, interests and needs align with a school's mission, programs, and expectations—are more satisfied with their jobs and more likely to stay in their positions (Liu & Johnson, 2006). Teachers who are hired late often experience an "information-poor process" and, subsequently, are more likely to leave than their peers who are hired on time (Liu & Johnson, 2006; Papay & Kraft, 2016). They are also less likely to benefit from a hiring process that serves as the first step of induction into their new school (Simon et al., 2019). Teachers who participate in an induction program and have support from a mentor teacher in their field are less likely to leave schools and teaching in general after their first year (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004).

Compensation and Career Path: Opportunities for professional advancement and pay increases are important for teacher retention. Ingersoll (2001) found that 25% of teacher departures are explained by a desire to pursue a better job, a different career, or to improve their career options in education. Most public-school teachers believe that they have few opportunities for advancement, and that the lack of upward mobility is a detractor (Farkas et al., 2000). Teachers also often report dissatisfaction with low salaries; teachers in school districts offering comparatively high salaries stay longer than teachers in districts offering low salaries (Gray & Taie, 2015; Ingersoll, 2001; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Kirby, Berends, & Naftel, 1999; Murnane, Singer, & Willett, 1991). In a recent study of teachers' preferences during the hiring process, Viano and colleagues (2020) found that salary is the most important "structural feature of employment" that teachers consider in deciding where to work.

Belonging and Wellbeing: Despite the fact that teachers may enjoy their profession, myriad pressures negatively impact the extent to which they enjoy their work (Kells, 2018). Relatedly, teachers' resilience reflects their ability to consistently provide instruction in the face of challenge (Brunetti, 2006; Hwang et al., 2017)—an attribute that bolsters teacher retention (Tait, 2008). Teacher wellbeing reflects how they perceive their quality of life on personal, professional, and relational levels (Spilt et al., 2011). Teachers' sense of belonging at work is related to their wellbeing (von der Embse & Mankin, 2020) and is an important factor in retention efforts (Kelchtermans, 2017).

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) and Cultural Competence

Attracting and retaining teachers of color has long been a challenge for school leaders (Achinstein et al., 2010). This trend reflects a teacher pipeline and retention problem, as well as a lack of resources in schools where most teachers of color work (Ingersoll et al., 2018). In addition to bolstering tangible supports in under-resourced work environments, creating equitable and inclusive school communities for teachers, students, and families is a critical component of teacher retention, particularly for teachers of color (Grissom & Keiser, 2011; Bristol, 2020). Fostering a welcoming environment involves directly addressing issues of power and privilege and attending to relational dynamics and local culture (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Bristol, 2020; Simon, Johnson & Reinhorn, 2015).

Diversity: Although efforts to recruit a more diverse workforce to public schools have been somewhat successful, teachers of color continue to exit the profession more rapidly than their White colleagues (Achinstein et al., 2010; Ingersoll et al., 2018), citing job dissatisfaction as a top reason for their departure (Ingersoll et al., 2019). Further, the average rate of attrition among teachers of color continues to outstrip their rate of entry (Ingersoll & May, 2011; Ingersoll et al., 2018, 2019), broadening "the demographic divide" between teachers and their students, particularly in high-poverty schools (Boser, 2014, p. 2). Students benefit from being taught by teachers who share similar background characteristics (Dee, 2005). Papageorge and colleagues (2018) have shown that White teachers hold lower expectations for their Black students than for their White students, and that these biased teacher beliefs predict lower levels of college attainment among Black students. However, when students of color are taught by teachers of the same race, teacher perceptions of student ability (Ouazad, 2014), student achievement on standardized tests (Clotfelter, Ladd, & Vigdor, 2011; Egalite, Kisida, & Winters, 2015, Gershenson et al., 2017), and rates of school attendance, high school graduation, and college matriculation rise (Villegas & Irvine, 2010).

Equity: School leaders must be intentional about employing equitable practices in their work with teachers. Teachers respect principals who treat them fairly (Simon & Johnson, 2015; Grissom & Keiser, 2011), and report leaving schools to avoid principals who are "arbitrary, abusive, or neglectful" (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003, p. 594). When they transfer, teachers seek out "fair and encouraging" leaders (p. 599). However, as compared to their White counterparts, teachers of color frequently experience inequitable pay and access to career advancement (Grissom & Keiser, 2011) and, by comparison, may be given more challenging job duties (Campbell & Ronfeldt, 2018; Madsen & Mabokela, 2014; Steinberg & Sartain, 2020). Grissom & Keiser (2011) found this to be especially true when Black teachers reported to White principals—a trend that may explain why, as teachers gain experience, they sort toward schools with principals of the same race.

Inclusion: Inclusion is a critical component of retaining a diverse workforce, helping to foster feelings of belonging and connectedness that make individuals want to stay with an organization (Brown, 2018; Carr et al., 2019). In an inclusive school culture, all members of the community, including teachers, students, and families feel that they belong. Collegial relationships play a crucial role in teachers' job satisfaction and are a key component of a school's working conditions (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Johnson et al., 2004; Kapadia, Coca, & Easton, 2007). Therefore, teachers' experiences with their co-workers are critical to their feelings of belonging in a school and, ultimately, to their decisions about whether to stay or go. For teachers of color, their colleagues' interactions with families play a particularly important role in their own sense of inclusion. When engagement with marginalized communities positions families and students as problematic (Yosso, 2005)—thereby reifying power differentials that distance teachers and families from each other (Bryan, Williams, & Griffin, 2020)—it diminishes a sense of inclusion in the community.

Cultural Competence: Teachers of color who leave the profession often do so because their schools have a "lack of multicultural capital (low expectations for, or negative attitudes about, students of color and lack of support for culturally responsive or socially just teaching)" (Achinstein & Ogawa, 2011, p. 74). It can be a struggle for White principals to effectively address racial inequalities in their school communities if they face resistance to change

from staff and are not yet confident about their own abilities to successfully facilitate challenging conversations about race (Swanson & Welton, 2019). Building teachers' self-awareness of how their personal identities—including experiences with oppression and marginalization—relate to teaching, learning, and professional growth is an important part of building a culturally-competent teaching staff that is willing to tackle equity work (Matias, 2013; Tuters, 2017). Mentorship by culturally-responsive veteran teachers is a key lever to help novice educators learn to incorporate these critical skills into their instructional practice (Coffey & Farinde-Wu, 2016). Employing culturally relevant pedagogy has been shown to improve student attendance and performance among at-risk students (Dee & Penner, 2017). Further, teachers from similar backgrounds to their students are more likely to utilize culturally relevant teaching techniques—which have been correlated with positive student achievement outcomes—and to help them understand the role of race and power dynamics in society (Villegas & Irvine, 2010).

Personal and Organizational Purpose

In his landmark study of teachers nearly five decades ago, Lortie found that teachers are frequently drawn to the profession by the "psychic rewards" (Lortie, 1975, p. 101) of working with students and because they want to make a difference in their lives. This remains true today, especially among teachers working with historically underserved students in high-poverty schools (Simon & Johnson, 2015; Simon et al., 2019). However, when teachers find that their school environments thwart their efforts, they often leave.

Care and Commitment: Teachers are more likely to stay in a school where they have positive relationships with other teachers. Johnson et al. (2012) found that teachers prefer to work in a supportive school culture where their colleagues are committed to their students' academic success. Teachers are also more likely to stay in a school where their colleagues are committed to, and have a sense of collective responsibility for, improving their school (Allensworth, et al., 2009; Johnson, 2019) and where they trust that their colleagues care about and are committed to the students (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Satisfaction and Purpose: Many teachers enter the profession because they see it as a life-long "calling" (Farkas et al., 2000, p. 10). Teachers frequently begin teaching in high-poverty schools because of their "humanistic commitment" to teaching in long underserved communities (Achinstein et al., 2010, p. 71; Cochran-Smith et al., 2012; Kraft et al., 2013). When these teachers leave, it is frequently because the working conditions in their schools impede their chance to teach and their students' chance to learn (Johnson, 1990, 2006; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Simon & Johnson, 2015).

Self-Efficacy: Teachers' self-efficacy—a teachers' belief in his or her "capabilities to bring about desired outcomes of student engagement and learning, even among those students who may be difficult or unmotivated" (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001, p. 283)—is correlated with teacher retention (Chan et al., 2008; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). Johnson and Birkeland (2003) reported that although teachers' personal circumstances influenced their career decisions, it was their "sense of success" (p. 581) with their own students that most influenced their decision about whether to stay in their school, move to a different school, or leave teaching altogether. Overall, the teachers said that it was the environment of their school that made success likely—or unlikely.

Conclusion

Many factors contribute to teachers' sense of satisfaction in their workplaces. District office and school-based administrators have the potential to anticipate and plan for turnover by understanding the settings, experiences, and personal qualities of the teachers they employ. Data on these predictors can also be used to inform efforts to reduce turnover through targeted interventions. When administrators understand the factors that influence teacher retention, they can more effectively work to create conditions that support and retain teachers.

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